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A Very Different Experience: Merchant Seamen on British Coastal Convoys 1940-45'

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Rosendahl, Bjorn Tore, *Allied Merchant Seafarers in the Second World War*, Cappelen
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A very different experience: Merchant Seamen on British coastal convoys 1940-45

Coastal Convoys: Introduction and Literature Review

Since the early 1940s academic and public understandings of the war at sea in Europe have been dominated by the struggle for control of the Atlantic sealanes. Images and narratives of U-boats versus the escorted, serial columns of merchant ships in carefully controlled and closely fought convoy actions in the Atlantic proliferate in media representations. The British Government's belated decision in 2012 to award veterans of the Russian convoys a special campaign medal in the form of the Arctic Star had only minimal impact on public perceptions of the geographical confines of Britain's sea war.¹ While within academic opinion there is a very firm understanding that the war at sea, especially the merchant seamen's war, was very different in the Atlantic, as opposed to the Mediterranean, Pacific and Arctic theatres of operation, one area of convoy operations in the Second World War continues to be seriously overlooked by both academics and the general public: the convoys which operated in UK coastal waters. While the Atlantic justifiably has taken the lion's share of public and academic attention (it was on this critical and closely contested campaign that Britain's survival depended from 1939 to 1945) the significance of the coastal convoys merits greater attention than they have hitherto received. As Richard Woodman has commented the coastal convoys remain 'one of the many disregarded elements in Britain's maritime struggle'.² The lack of academic inquiry into the wartime coastal convoys constitutes a surprising and very serious gap in the literature of the Second World War, the history of the British Merchant Navy and the narratives of many of the maritime communities along the East Coast of the United Kingdom. Put simply the coastal convoys were equally critical to Britain's survival as the Atlantic convoys from 1940 to 1944. They produced a very different set of strategic and tactical problems for both sides in the war at sea that has not been studied in any depth. In turn, the tactical and strategic problems of coastal convoys meant a significantly different wartime experiences for the merchant navy crews trying to fight their ships through to destinations on the South and East Coasts of the United Kingdom. As we try to refine and add detail to our understanding of the merchant seamen's experience in the Second World War, the nature of the war at sea, and the life of seafarers in those communities that produced the coaster crews, it is essential to interrogate and establish such differences in substantially greater depth. The nature of the war at sea in European waters cannot be understood without a fuller appreciation of the role and importance of coastal convoys.

During the war comparatively little was done to bring the efforts of merchant seamen on the coastal runs to public attention and that has fed through into academic writing about the war at sea.³ For example, although British Pathé newsreels covered the *Luftwaffe's kanalkampf* against the East coast convoys in July 1940 it was the brilliance of the Spitfire pilots, rather than the stoicism of merchant navy crews, that was celebrated.⁴ At least in covering the use of German shore artillery against the coastal convoys in August 1940 Pathé made reference to the

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'superb seamanship and indomitable courage' which allowed the coastal convoys to fight through the barrage.⁵ Similarly, by the end of 1944 the Ministry of Information had published pamphlets covering the achievements of *Coastal Command*, *Combined Operations 1940-42*, *The Campaign in Greece and Crete*, *Fleet Air Arm*, *Eighth Army*, *His Majesty's Minesweepers* and a dozen other titles. Some of them briefly touched on the subject of coastal convoys. For example, the bravery of Marine W.C. Prescott in continuing to fire the 4-inch gun of the SS *Terlings* against incoming enemy aircraft even as the vessel slipped beneath the English Channel, was recognised by the award of a Lloyd's War Medal for bravery and celebrated in the Ministry of Information's guide to the achievements of *The Royal Marines* published in 1944.⁶ However, in terms of recognising the bravery of merchant seamen on the coastal runs it was not until 1947 that the title *British Coaster, 1939-45* was published.⁷ It is not surprising that one surviving veteran has commented: 'These Coastal Convoys have "slipped through the net" of History. The Atlantic and Mediterranean ones are well-known in story and documentary, but the coastals are literally unknown, even to RN sailors who served on the ocean convoy routes'.⁸ Lost in history, they remain almost totally overlooked by serious academic historians.

Comparatively little has been written about British coastal convoys of the Second World War, and almost nothing on the operation of Axis coastal convoys in North European and Mediterranean waters. This leaves a significant gap in our understanding of wartime strategy, logistics, military operations and the experiences of merchant seamen in the midst of the Second World War. For the British coastal convoys much of what has appeared has been directed at the market for popular histories of the Second World War, and the flaws of such works are considerable both in access to sources and levels of analysis. Alexander McKee's *The Coal Scuttle Brigade* written in the 1950s before sources in the National Archives (Public Record Office) were open to researchers, was an early attempt to focus attention on the coastal convoys.⁹ McKee expressed his surprise in the foreword to his book that 'some of the fiercest convoy battles of the war could take place literally on England's doorstep... and yet remain almost unknown'.¹⁰ Ten years later, Smith's *Hold the Narrow Sea: Naval Warfare in the English Channel 1939-1945* documented key events in the story of the Coastal Convoys while providing little overall analysis.¹¹ The *Battle of the East Coast* by J.P. Foynes in 1994 delivered a compendium of detail, but as a self-published book its impact on both academic and popular opinion was minimal.¹² Robert Jackson's 1995 study, *Churchill's Moat: The Channel War 1939-1945* covered coastal convoys as part of a wider narrative of warfare in the narrow seas between Britain and France.¹³ While most general histories of the Second World War at sea have ignored the story of the smaller ships Alan Burn's *The Fighting Commodores: The Convoy Commanders in the Second World War* at least devoted a chapter to the coastal commodores.¹⁴ Finally Nick Hewitt's book *Coastal Convoys 1939-1945* in 2008 gave some overview but was very much aimed at the popular market.¹⁵ Beyond this, coastal convoys have featured as the backdrop to naval engagements in histories of British and German coastal forces.¹⁶ The lack of writing on the coastal convoys belies the importance of the coastal trade before the war and during it. By contrast with the writing on the Second World War there has been significantly more, and better quality writing, on coastal warfare and conveying off the shores of the United Kingdom before 1939.¹⁷ Without the small

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ships plying their trade along the coasts of the United Kingdom the British economy simply could not function efficiently. That trading and economic reality potentially opened up some interesting possibilities for any state going to war with Great Britain.

Coastal Convoys: Function and Importance

On the outbreak of the Second World War the portion of the British fleet employed in home waters was significant. In 1937 1,479 steam and motor vessels totalling 1,151,880 grt and employing 21,324 British and 261 foreign seamen were primarily engaged in the British coasting trade.¹⁸ Convoying on the coastal routes was introduced in 1939, but became truly significant after the Fall of France which added greatly to the strategic significance of short sea traffic around the coast of the United Kingdom. With Britain on the brink of defeat, and Germany able to establish air and sea bases along the Channel coast, it was apparent that East coast convoys were particularly vulnerable to attack and disruption. Bringing convoys through the Dover-Calais narrows was abandoned. However, such was the on-going requirement for coal in the South East (approximately 40,000 tons per week) that convoys would have to run on six days out of seven from the Firth of Forth to the Thames estuary.¹⁹ If they could be stopped the British war economy would be paralysed.

During the war the coastal convoys fulfilled two significant strategic functions in terms of the British economy: Firstly they brought coal from the North East England and Wales to the South East of England (for the purposes of heating homes and fuelling the power stations vital to maintain British war industries). In 1852 William Cory had initiated the use of steam colliers to bring coal into the capital. Coal carried by sea quickly came to dominate the London market, and the growth of power-intensive industries in the capital such as heavy engineering, chemicals, shipbuilding and armaments was fuelled by plentiful supplies of coal.²⁰ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards in time of war the supply of coal via the coastal route had to be maintained if the domestic energy supplies, and industrial output, of the capital were to be maintained.

The second strategic function of the coastal convoys was that they eased the burden on West coast ports and the rail network, by facilitating the West to East movement of cargoes from larger vessels that had crossed the North Atlantic. In September 1940, as the Luftwaffe switched its attention to the capital, ocean-going ships were barred from entering the Port of London, and although this was relaxed in January 1941 strict limitations were placed on their number in the river at any one time (50).²¹ On 10 September the Admiralty placed a limitation restricting the Humber ports to ships of no more than 6,500 gross registered tons, and prohibited the use of the ports to the south of the river except to coasters. With cargoes destined for the East coast and London arriving at West coast ports (Liverpool, Bristol etc) other means would have to be found to transport them to their destination. This resulted in dramatic changes in demand in the logistical networks on which Britain's survival depended. For example, before the war 80% of cargoes entering the Port of Liverpool had reached their destinations via short road journey (12% via rail). By 1944 almost 30% of cargoes entering the port of Liverpool were transported onward

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by rail, with the result that the United Kingdom rail network was under severe strain. The strain on the logistical network, and a developing crisis of imports, led in January 1941 to the Admiralty allowing ships of up to 8,500 grt on the East Coast run.²²

Incorporating ships (under 8,500 grt) that had made the Atlantic run into coastal convoys offered one means to ease the burden: so too did the transshipment of cargoes from larger ships into small coasting vessels. This could be done in port or in sheltered anchorages using the derricks of the larger ships. With both coal deliveries and the onward transshipment of cargoes that had crossed the Atlantic the coastal convoys played a vital role in alleviating the pressure on UK ports.

Transshipping cargoes to coasters meant that smaller ports, closer to the point of use could be utilised, lessening demand on the big ports in the West. As Hancock and Gowing noted in *British War Economy* 'if the east coast ports had been completely closed, there would have been severe port congestion. As it was, elimination of port delays was one of the most promising methods of improving the carrying capacity of British ships'.²³ Coastal convoys were essential from 1940 to 1942 in preventing a shipping and import crisis through port delay.

Coastal Convoys: Threats

Despite some operations by German U-boats in the North Sea in 1939 and 1940, the Fall of France transformed the strategic position of the *Kriegsmarine*. U-boat bases were established on the French Atlantic at places such as Lorient, Brest and St Nazaire. In the shallow waters of the English Channel submarines were relatively easy prey for anti-submarine vessels. In such waters the offensive against the coastal convoys would be carried by the *Luftwaffe*, and by the smaller fighting ships of the *Kriegsmarine*. The *Schnellboote* (S-Boats) of the German Navy were particularly important in this latter group. Armed with two torpedo tubes and two reloads, together with mines, cannon and machine guns, and capable of speeds of up to 45 knots, they represented a formidable threat in the waters of the English Channel. Based along the Channel coast from Ijmuiden to Cherbourg the S-Boat came into its own as a weapon against coastal convoys from June 1940 onwards.

In 1940 S-Boats, sometimes assisted by the *Luftwaffe*, scored some significant successes against coastal convoys. Although the number of operational S-Boats was low (some ten to fifteen craft) the British found them hard to deal with. As Captain Roskill recorded in the Royal Navy's official history of The War at Sea: 'not only were they hard to sight while lying in wait on the convoy routes by night, but our escort vessels were too slow to catch and destroy them'.²⁴ In the second half of 1940 twenty-three ships totalling 47,985 tons were lost to S-Boat attacks by torpedo with others being lost to the bombs of the *Luftwaffe* and seamines laid by aircraft and vessels.²⁵

For example, convoy CW8, passing westbound through the Straits of Dover on 25 July 1940, was badly attacked losing five merchant ships to bombs (two escorting destroyers and four other merchant vessels damaged).²⁶ The following day the

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remains of the convoy were attacked by S-boats which claimed three further victims. Only eleven ships of CW8 passed Dungeness.²⁷ The following convoy CW9, with 25 ships, was similarly heavily engaged when it passed westbound through the Straits of Dover on the afternoon of 7 August 1940. It was attacked by S-boats that night, losing three ships. Badly disorganised by the attack the convoy was straggled out over a distance of about ten miles. *Luftwaffe* bombers attempted to pick off the stragglers, but RAF fighter aircraft from No.145 Squadron managed to prevent the enemy bombers from sinking any more ships.²⁸ The attack on Channel convoys in the summer of 1940 demonstrated the potential impact of combined *Luftwaffe-Kriegsmarine* activity against highly vulnerable coastal routes. The German Naval High Command noted the expressions of alarm in the British press with considerable satisfaction: 'The British press and propaganda has a great deal to say on the activities of our ... [S-]boats. Announcements reveal that the enemy realizes the great danger represented by this weapon'.²⁹

During 1939 and 1941 bomb, mine and torpedo took a steady toll on the coastal convoys, but a series of breakthroughs and events kept the losses within manageable levels. This was in part down to the failure of *Luftwaffe-Kriegsmarine* co-operation in the attack on shipping. Despite the successes against CW8 and CW9 in 1940 the *Luftwaffe* (or more accurately its head) remained largely uninterested in working with the *Kriegsmarine*.³⁰ Something around a third of the mines available for use against the coastal convoys were instead dropped on land targets because of their greater explosive yield.³¹ In the six months up until the end of February 1940 German mines sank 89 ships in British coastal waters.³² However, the recovery of a German magnetic mine in November 1939 enabled the British to implement counter-measures in the form of degaussing in 1940. Even so it was not until early 1941 that losses due to German mines declined to just a handful of sinkings per month. The winter of 1940-41 had represented a vital window of opportunity to attack the coastal convoys. As Sönke Neitzel has argued: 'If the *Luftwaffe* and the navy had agreed on a common strategy it could have weakened Great Britain to a considerable extent in 1940/41 when the *Luftwaffe* still had large resources available'.³³ At the end of 1940, in reviewing the effectiveness of *Luftwaffe* bombing attacks against ships in UK waters, there was some satisfaction within the Admiralty that attacks by the German Air Force had proved less effective than had been expected after the CW8 debacle.³⁴ In the spring of 1941 many *Luftwaffe* units were relocated to the East in preparation for the launch of operation *Barbarossa* on 22 June 1941. At the same time, the S-Boat threat was partly countered by the development of British coastal forces, and in particular the motor gun boat [MGB] during 1941. The MGB was proclaimed as 'Britain's answer' to the S-Boats.³⁵ Developments in shore and ship-based radar, developments in the use of aircraft against S-Boats put increasing pressure on the S-Boat arm. As Captain S.W. Roskill wrote in volume 2 of the official history of the war at sea, by 1942:

The patrol line of motor gunboats and motor launches . . . [was] established some eight miles to seaward of the shipping lanes . . . Our short-wave shore radar and the 'Very High Frequency' wireless stations now played a big part in keeping the patrol craft informed of enemy movements. By the end of the year [1942] the whole of the Nore Command's coastal area was covered by

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these radar beams, and the enemy could be detected and plotted while still some twenty miles offshore; and added to this great advantage was the fact that radar sets were now being fitted in the Coastal Force vessels themselves.³⁶

Despite the growing effectiveness of Britain's defences on the East coast, the S-Boat campaign held up remarkably well until 1942, partly helped by a switch in the emphasis of the campaign to the convoys along the South Coast.³⁷

Although the Royal Navy and RAF Coastal Command steadily built up their patrol network in the English Channel, enhancing the number of escort vessels and making more systematic use of electronic and other sources of intelligence, when S-Boats did attack a convoy the effect was devastating. When Convoy PW250 was attacked near the Eddystone light on 19 November 1942 by 6 S-Boats from the 5th Flotilla from Cherbourg three merchant ships were sunk together with an escorting armed-whaler HMS *Ullswater*.

Despite the attack on Convoy PW250 1942 represented a turning point.³⁸ In 1943 the S-Boat campaign against the coastal convoys collapsed, only seeing a revival in 1944 as a result of increased traffic in the English Channel as a result of the D-Day landings.³⁹

S-Boat Success against Merchant Ships 1940-45

Year	Tonnage	Number of Ships
1940	47,985	23
1941	58,854	29
1942	71,156	23
1943	15,138	6
1944	26,321	13
1945	10,222	5 ⁴⁰

Coasters: The Ships

The coasting vessels most commonly found in the coastal convoys were rather different from ocean-going vessels. Coasters had smaller crews, fewer holds and more rudimentary facilities. Reports from convoy commodores on the coastal run make fascinating reading. There are frequent expressions of disgust from former senior Royal Navy officers at the conditions they were expected to serve in on coasters (albeit briefly) while acting as commodore to a particular convoy. Where a commodore found above average conditions he could be effusive in his praise. For example, Commodore Mulhall was fulsome in his comments on the facilities on the SS *Lea Grange* in May 1944: 'An unusually well-fitted collier; compasses good; speed

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control excellent; Master and officers very efficient...; accommodation good – spare cabin, good chart room settee; spare cabin for signalmen; food very good'.⁴¹

Suggestions from the Ministry of Shipping, Ministry of War Transport or Admiralty to coaster companies about how they might improve their vessels in the patriotic pursuit of victory were usually met with some suspicion if it potentially meant some expense on the part of the owners.⁴²

Part of the problem with coasters was that their design features were usually influenced by the type of waters in which they operated. For example, the SS *Fulham* launched in 1935 by Fulham Borough Council to service the needs of its power station at Battersea Reach was designed to a flat iron configuration which meant minimal superstructure, and a hinged funnel, so that she could pass under bridges. Capable of 10.5 knots fully loaded the SS *Fulham* had a maximum draught of 16 feet.⁴³ The majority of coasters were small ships. For example, the average size of the fourteen coasters managed by the London Power Company during the war was 1597 gross registered tons (smallest 1,222 grt: largest 2709 grt). Five were lost (1 collision, 1 U-boat and 3 to S-boats) between 1940 and 1945.⁴⁴ Thirteen of the 21 ships managed by collier company William Cory and Son were lost during the war (7 to mines, 4 aircraft, 2 to S-boats) and they averaged 2184 grt smallest 911 grt: largest 3,431 grt).⁴⁵

Against the weapons of the *Kriegsmarine* and *Luftwaffe* the vessels of the coastal convoys mounted weapons which the crews felt were wholly inadequate. Coasters were less well-armed than bigger ships. They had fewer suitable locations for gun mountings, and decks and frames would have fewer possibilities for 'stiffening' to mount guns such as Bofors, 12 pounder or 4-inch. Coasters instead had to rely on a variety of machine guns such as the Lewis and Bren. As one deckhand from the SS *West Town* later explained: 'all that we had to protect us [from the S-boats] was a stripped down Lewis machine gun.... The trouble was they had several weapons to reply'.⁴⁶

Some of the machine guns fitted to coasters were of first world war vintage and of dubious reliability. The 648 ton, 9 knot collier, SS *Methilhill* was rather better armed than many with a 12 pounder and two 1917 model .30 calibre Marlin machine guns on each of the bridge wings. However, the crew despised the Marlin as 'a very poor weapon really – it jammed – it seized up'.⁴⁷ Similarly, the steam or compressed air powered Holman projector was another weapon typically fitted to coasters that their crews came to hate. A pneumatic mortar designed to launch an explosive projectile, such as a hand grenade, into the air against low flying aircraft the Holman projector developed a reputation for unreliability. A drop in pneumatic pressure could result in the projectile dropping back towards the ship's deck before it had exploded. For example, when convoy FN23 was attacked by aircraft on 15 July 1940 the SS *Hull Trader* tried to defend herself with her single Lewis gun and Holman projector. The first hand grenade into the projector exploded injuring two members of the crew.⁴⁸

Anti-aircraft kites and balloons were similarly problematic for coaster crews. During the summer of 1940 balloons were introduced on the coastal convoys. Handled by the Mobile Balloon Barrage Flotilla they were intended to make life difficult for

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Luftwaffe pilots seeking to attack the coastal convoys.⁴⁹ Controlling the balloons was, however, very difficult and they were generally despised as more trouble than they were worth.⁵⁰ Some masters appear to have been willing to turn a Nelsonian blind eye to instructions to raise balloons while in convoy.⁵¹ After the aerial attacks on coastal convoys in 1940 some Royal Navy officers came to the same conclusion as the collier crews that balloons were probably more trouble than they were worth in weather conditions where the cloud base was not unusually low.⁵²

The small crews on coasters meant a shortage of potential gunners for the available armament. While larger ships benefitted from the provision of DEMS [Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship] gunners, many coasters had difficulty in finding accommodation for them. Bigger coasters like those of Coast Lines could, however, find room since they had been designed pre-war to carry a few passengers. As a stop-gap on 27 February 1940, the War Office agreed to supply British Army machine gun teams to such vessels on the East Coast run that had suitable accommodation and space. This meant that at places like Southend gunners would come aboard carrying Lewis or Bren guns. The gunners would stay onboard for the most dangerous part of the journey as far as Methil where they could be put ashore, potentially joining a Forth-South convoy for the return.

Aircraft identification was not a particular speciality of the DEMS gunners on the coastal run and convoy reports mention several instances where coasters fired on friendly aircraft. This took different forms with merchant navy crews firing on RAF Fighter Command and Coastal Command aircraft from 1939 to 1942.⁵³ Within the Royal Navy there was some sympathy for the merchant seamen based on a suspicion that RAF pilots did not act in a manner which showed that they understood the difficulties facing gun crews on board ship as an aircraft approached.⁵⁴ As the Allied heavy bomber offensive against Germany built up in 1943 and 1944, with the skies over the Wash and the East Anglian coast becoming crowded, coastal convoys sometimes fired on bomber streams heading to and from Germany.⁵⁵ Returning the favour there are several reports of coastal vessels being near missed by bombs as returning aircraft, that had been unable to find their European targets, disposed of their payloads before landing.

Coasters : The Crews

Life on board a coaster was a very different experience to serving on a larger ocean-going merchant ship. Coasters were generally dirtier (especially colliers), wetter (because of their low freeboard), paid less than ocean-going ships and were more rudimentary in terms of facilities. Jack Prior, able seaman on the *West Town* recounted: 'When we joined the vessels at the wharf near Tilbury we were told to bring our own food and a mattress which was a straw paliase. We worked four hours on and four off with five shillings a month in lieu of overtime and a wage of £12 per month'.⁵⁶ One Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy, who was also a Conservative member in Parliament confessed in 1943: 'I was shocked when I returned to the Navy at the beginning of this war to find that conditions in coastal vessels had been practically unaltered, generally speaking, since 1918. In 1943 in many vessels a man who wants to wash in hot water has to pull it up in a bucket

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from the stokehold'.⁵⁷ Concern about the unsatisfactory nature of conditions on coasters did result in limited improvement during the war. When Everards launched MV *Supremity* in 1944 attention was drawn in several publications to the quality of the accommodation provided for the crew. The fact that this accommodation, by any other than that of the pre-war coastal trade, would class as bleak, monastic or Spartan only emphasised the awfulness of the conditions experienced by most merchant seamen operating in the home trades.⁵⁸

Small ships required small, tight knit, crews. The crew of the *West Town* was small even by the standards of the coastal trade: 'captain, chief officer, two engineers, two stokers and two deck hands'.⁵⁹ A shortage of hands meant that the visual signals needed to co-ordinate convoys were often missed, and not passed down the columns of merchant ships. Royal Navy signalmen were placed on some coasters to assist the crews. Even so, on at least one occasion the failure of a coaster to maintain an adequate lookout for signals resulted in several rounds being placed across her bows to wake up the watch keepers.⁶⁰

Meals on coasters were often monotonous, and instead of a proper cook, most crews shared cooking duties between them. On the other hand, foodstuffs like eggs, milk, vegetables could be replenished from ashore every few days whereas ocean voyages might last 2 months without fresh stores. A coasting seaman could rely on getting medical help for toothache or injury. On short trips coasters might work a two-watch system while ocean-going ships worked the less-tiring 3-watch system. The skill level demanded of watch keepers on coasting vessels was, at the outbreak of war at least, typically lower than that of Deck officers on ocean-going vessels. Amongst the merchant navy there was a particularly direct means of expressing the differences between ocean-going and coastal masters: 'They say that when a coaster skipper loses sight of the land, he shits himself. When a deep-sea skipper sees some land, he too shits himself'.⁶¹

The Board of Trade's Syllabus for 'Home Trade' certificates of competency for Masters and Mates had significant differences from that required for 'Foreign-Going' certificates.⁶² For example, the 'Foreign-Going' certificate called for much greater competence in astral navigation and weather. One seaman later described the syllabus for the coasting mate's ticket as less than demanding, requiring 'little more than the ability to read and write, and to distinguish between the sun and the moon and one end of a collier from the other'.⁶³ Home Trade Masters and Mates were subject to verbal questioning to demonstrate their competency while their Foreign-Going equivalents were examined in writing and orally. The situation in the British coasting trade in the inter-war period was underlined in 1938 in Parliament when the President of the Board of Trade had to respond to questions from MPs about undermanned and ill-trained coaster crews.⁶⁴ Royal Navy reports on the coastal convoys, particularly for the early months of the war, routinely feature comments about the behaviour and competence of coaster crews. For example, the Captain of HMS Grimsby advised the Captain of the destroyer escort force at Rosyth that 'very few of the ships in the East Coast convoys appear to be able to read a signal of any kind'.⁶⁵ In the circumstances of the Second World War the Board of Trade relaxed some of its requirements for masters and mates in the home trade.

What the coastal crews did have, however, was the expert knowledge needed to navigate in coastal waters with their tides, shoalwaters and currents. They had a familiarity with landmarks and all manner of local peculiarities. Many masters of coasters had a very detailed understanding of the waters that their trade forced them to ply. They also had the ship handling skills required to go with that knowledge. Those skills were at a premium during the war, particularly on the East Coast where wrecks added to pre-war difficulties of navigating in shallow waters along narrow passages. James Goodchild RN Gunner served on MV *River Trent* carrying grain to Norwich later recalled: 'you could see shipwrecks all the way down from Hull to Yarmouth. They said you could swim the whole way and have a wreck to rest on all the way down.'⁶⁶ Night time navigation of channels swept clear by minesweepers was a further challenge for coastal watch keepers. As Alan Burn has noted: 'Once a convoy was outside the maze of the channels among the shoals off Norfolk and the mouth of the Thames estuary, the ships crept from one to another of the dimly lit buoys which marked the swept channels, though the buoys were often either missing or out of position'.⁶⁷ Storm conditions, or thick fog, in such a restricted seaway required shiphandling skills of the very highest order.⁶⁸

Some of the crews operating on the coastal convoys had to acquire this knowledge often from scratch during 1940 and 1941. These were the crews of the Dutch, Norwegian, French vessels that suddenly found themselves pressed into service along Britain's East and South Coasts as part of the Allied merchant fleet. Later American crews had to go through the same process of learning the intricacies of the British coast. Different languages, practices and national mentalities added a further complication to the task of marshalling and managing the coastal convoys.⁶⁹ Such ships did play a significant role in maintaining Britain's coastal convoys throughout the war making up a significant minority of the ships in any one convoy. For example, the 38 ship Convoy FN23, which left Southend on 15 July 1940 contained 4 Dutch and 2 Norwegian ships. The ten ship FN73 which arrived in Methil on 28 March 1945 comprised 6 British ships, two Norwegians, one Greek and one Yugoslav vessel.

In addition to a higher level of ship handling skills coastal crews were forced to operate in a different way to larger ships. An ocean-going master needed to be able to deal with government and port regulations anywhere in the world. He needed to understand how to deal with foreign dockers, their trade unions, their religious requirements, their habits. He had to be able to use his own judgement far from home and in circumstances where communication with head office would take too long. The coastal master was much more closely controlled by the shipowners, and by a timetable that needed to run irrespective of the weather. In the circumstances of war this sense that coastal crews could operate on the equivalent of a railway timetable led to at least one warning in the House of Commons that the Ministry of War Transport had to beware the tendency to drive crews too hard by thinking about the coastal convoys 'in terms of railway trains running on rails with a signal every half-a-mile'.⁷⁰

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The strain of operating in hostile and narrow waters was considerable and it took its toll on coaster crews. The threat of enemy action was ever present, and if attacks were rare in comparison to the overall number of sailings then that gave little protection against the strain of watching and waiting.⁷¹ In the House of Commons on 14 July 1943 Lieutenant-Commander Gurney Braithwaite (Conservative, Holderness) referred to the 'signs of strain.... appearing [amongst] coastal masters and deck hands'.⁷² Fred Dent gunner on the SS *Methilhill* recounted in a post-war interview that on the coastal convoys there were 'not a lot of restful periods'.⁷³ Occasionally the levels of strain reached the point where complaints would be voiced. When Convoy CW221 was attacked on 4 November 1943 there were bitter complaints from the coaster crews that, with just one destroyer and lighter craft as escort, that they were little better than sitting ducks. A minimum escort of two destroyers per convoy had become the norm by 1942.⁷⁴ The loss of two merchant vessels from an 18 ship convoy rattled the men on the surviving ships.⁷⁵ The mate of the SS *Fulham* explained to a security officer that visited his ship that as Merchant Navy personnel were being 'sought for the much talked of Second Front [he] personally ... would be only too pleased to take part, as he would at least get decent and reasonable protection'.⁷⁶ There was some recognition of the need to address the feelings of vulnerability for coaster crews with C-in-C Portsmouth commenting: 'Although the substance of these reports is from imperfectly informed persons they emphasise once again the necessity for additional escorting destroyers for Channel convoys'.⁷⁷ The morale of the mate of the SS *Fulham* did matter and this was tacit acknowledgement that the reserves of bravery of the coaster crews was a finite resource.

To the strain of near continuous threat along the coastal convoy route was added the knowledge that the detonation of a mine or torpedo was likely to result in catastrophic damage to a coaster. The G7a torpedo, ground and acoustic mines, had the capacity to sink a battleship let alone a small coaster. Carrying a bulk cargo, with a small freeboard and large hatches to make the task of unloading that much easier, a small coaster could sink very rapidly. Wooden hatch covers rather than steel increased the speed at which a coaster would sink and also increased the chances that any explosion would break the vessel in two.

Gallantry awards reflected the problems for coaster crews in any sinking. Between 1940 and 1945 the Lloyds War Medal was awarded to eleven merchant seamen whose vessels were attacked by S-boats. Seven of the cases involved the rescue of trapped or wounded survivors.⁷⁸ The massive structural damage sustained by coasters following torpedo or mine explosion, and their tendency to sink rapidly made for agonising scenes. When the Free French coaster *Daphne* (1,970grt) in convoy FN34 was torpedoed off the Humber estuary by S-102 at 1am on 18 March 1941 eight men were initially trapped. The Donkeyman could not be freed from his Cabin and as the crew prepared to abandon ship one shook his hand through an open light 'and promised to visit his wife and children in France after the war'.⁷⁹

Coastal Convoys: Organisation and Defence

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Convoying was instituted on the coastal routes in 1939, but in the early months of the war there was some hand ringing within the Royal Navy about whether it was actually possible to shepherd the motley collection of ill-disciplined vessels that constituted a coastal convoy. Commodore Davenport RNR commented 'It appears to me very doubtful if the East Coast convoy can turn into a completely organised and well drilled convoy for some time'.⁸⁰ A commodore on one of the first war time convoys expressed the hope that station keeping in particular would 'improve greatly with practice'.⁸¹ His report otherwise emphasised the problematical nature of maintaining discipline and order over coastal vessels and their crews: 'Station keeping of convoy was poor during the first 24 hours... signals had to be made constantly to tell the convoy to keep better station & maintain speed, but, even so, the convoy spread and straggled a great deal, especially at night'.⁸²

Partly as a result of the problems during the opening months of the war ships were still routed independently around the shores of Britain. Those independents suffered disproportionate losses in the early phases of the war especially from mines. As the official history noted: 'Of ships sunk by mine in UK coastal waters, three out of every four were sailing independently although the bulk of our shipping was in convoy'.⁸³ The Royal Navy's confidence in coastal crews grew during 1940 and 1941, but there remained particular problem spots. As Captain Champion (Naval Control Senior Officer Thames and Medway) commented to the Admiralty's Trade Division in September 1942: 'The behaviour of ships ex-Tyne ports is proverbial and no conference orders have any effect'.⁸⁴ References to the 'Tyne contingent', 'Tyne flotilla', 'Tyne Section' can be found across the convoy reports for the duration of the war.⁸⁵ Despite the years of practice, Commodores were still complaining about the inability of Tyneside colliers to keep station in convoy as late as October 1944.⁸⁶

Despite the difficulties, convoying kept losses to a minimum, and to supplement it by the end of 1939 defensive mine belts had been laid all along the East coast from the mouth of the Thames to the Moray Firth.⁸⁷ The principal purpose of this exercise was to keep minelaying u-boats away from the East coast ports and routes. Between the mine belts and the coast, the coastal convoys would run, protected by some 35,000 contact mines.⁸⁸ A convoy which might start in Methil with several vessels from a trans-Atlantic convoy, would receive and disburse ships from and to Blyth, Tyne, Sunderland, Seaham, Tees, Humber, and the East Anglian Ports as it headed south towards Southend.⁸⁹ The narrow corridor along the East coast created by the defensive minebelts was further complicated by a network of shoals, and during the war it would be further complicated by wrecks. In peacetime conditions these were not the easiest of waters to navigate and in the circumstances of war there were considerable difficulties for the management and passage of convoys. In particular, given the route, the coastal convoys were never going to prove difficult to find for a determined enemy. Churchill recognised the implications: 'As it was impossible to vary the East Coast route, the passage of each convoy between the Forth and London became almost every day an action in itself'.⁹⁰

Organising and managing the coastal convoys was no easy matter. Despite hopes on the outbreak of war that East coast convoys could be kept down to a size of no more than 35 vessels then often numbered in excess of 60.⁹¹ Managing such an armada meant that Convoy commodores on the coastal runs required rather different skills than their deep ocean counterparts. As Alan Burn has explained:

Most of the commodores on the coastal convoys were either Commanders or Lieutenant Commanders in the Royal Naval Reserve. In some ways they did not have so much freedom of action as the Ocean Commodores, because their ships were restricted to narrow corridors and the tails of the columns of their convoys were many miles astern, usually out of sight. Whereas the ocean commodore had sea room and could dispose his convoy over a wide front and exercise his charges before entering the danger zones, and had some chance to manoeuvre and take evasive action when attacked, the coastal convoy commodore had no such options.⁹²

Managing convoys that sometimes straggled over an extended area due to navigational restrictions was particularly difficult. Collisions in convoy were frequent, which underlined Royal Navy concerns about the quality of seamanship in the coastal crews.⁹³ Mechanical problems with older ships were frequent, but at least on the coastal run there was usually a safe harbour within easy reach. Buoys would prove hard to find, their lights extinguished or dragged as a result of collision by a passing ship and the relay of instructions down the columns of a convoy was often disrupted thanks to the shortage of deck officers keeping a lookout.

The problems of managing the coastal convoys were exacerbated during 1943 in the D-Day preparation phase by the deployment of larger ships, and a greater variety of types. As one Royal Navy veteran commented: 'Unlike the Ocean Convoys, where ships were grouped with those of similar size, speed and turning-circle, the coastals contained the lot! Liners converted to troopships, "Liberty Ships", tankers, "flat-iron" colliers, small coasters, and tiny, usually Dutch, "scoots" - all with different turning-circles and handling characteristics, especially in heavy weather'.⁹⁴ Convoying with landing craft was a particular hazard as one merchant seamen found in 1944: 'On one voyage on the Fulham VII we were heading up the English Channel, bound for London. This was at night when an invasion craft collided with us. It tore away our portside lifeboat, davits, boatfalls, damaged all the bulwarks tore away the portside light, no one was hurt thankfully.'⁹⁵

The task of escorting the coastal convoys was particularly problematic. Following heavy losses of destroyers at Dunkirk the Royal Navy struggled to provide sufficient escort vessels for the coastal convoys from 1940 to 1942. The provision of just one destroyer as close escort was the norm until late 1941. To supplement this, smaller vessels taken up from trade (usually fishing boats, whalers and drifters) were employed as makeshift escorts and minesweepers. For example, following the Dunkirk evacuation a flotilla of Dutch schuytes (fishing boats of approximately 200 tons) were rapidly fitted with whatever armaments could be spared to be pressed into service as Channel escorts under the white ensign using Royal Marine crews.⁹⁶ As other vessels suitable for escort work were identified, increasingly they were operated by the men of the Royal Navy Patrol Service and crewed predominantly by fishermen who had joined the Royal Naval Reserve in the 1930s. During 1941 these meagre forces were supplemented by growing numbers of motor launches and other armed light patrol vessels, and by the end of the year it became possible to provide two destroyer escorts per convoy. This was reduced again to one destroyer escort

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per convoy in early 1943 as a result of the developing offensive in the Mediterranean. C-in-C Nore became increasingly eager for the return of the three Hunt Class destroyers which had been detached from his command for service in Operation Husky (in total 43 Hunt class destroyers were operating in the Mediterranean).⁹⁷ Although he did not receive the hunts an additional five town class destroyers were found for the Rosyth Command. By late 1943, as concerns mounted that deliveries via coastal convoys under the Bolero plan were 'lagging behind schedule', coal stocks were estimated to be three weeks below minimum Bolero requirements for the Spring of 1944.⁹⁸ On 25 November the Naval Staff instructed the commands at the Nore, Rosyth and Portsmouth to begin seven day convoying.⁹⁹ C-in-C Nore Command accepted the order only 'on the understanding that the situation renders it essential to accept a considerably increased risk'.¹⁰⁰ One representative of the Trade Division minuted: 'I hope that our luck with the East Coast convoys will hold until reinforcements are available'.¹⁰¹

In addition to close escorts, the security of the convoy routes depended on destroyers patrolling the convoy route or in port along the East and South Coast and available for immediate deployment in support of a convoy or to meet a developing attack. Standing patrols of aircraft and coastal forces, and increasingly better radar coverage of the approaches to the convoy routes, added extra layers of support that the men on the coasters were rarely in a position to fully appreciate. For example, the close escort for one East coast northbound convoy, attacked by S-boats on 24-25 October 1943, was provided by the destroyer HMS *Pythley*. But also at sea in support of the convoy were four other destroyers, four motor launches, 9 Motor Torpedo Boats and 8 Motor Gun Boats.¹⁰²

Such defences in depth meant that the Admiralty did indeed get away with providing just one major warship as close escort to coastal convoys during late 1943 and early 1944. Following D-Day the threat to coastal convoys from S-Boats declined markedly (especially after RAF Bomber Command mounted a devastating attack on Le Havre on 14 June 1944). In the late summer of 1944, as Allied forces advanced along the coast of the continent, the surviving S-Boats were concentrated in Dutch waters making it harder for them to attack convoys running along the East Coast of the United Kingdom. As the threat to coastal shipping from S-Boats decreased, that from U-boats temporarily increased as the *Kriegsmarine* mounted a short lived campaign in the North Sea and waters around Britain. Fortunately, losses of merchant ships did not mount significantly before the war ended, although that did little to ease the nerves of the merchant seamen facing a renewed threat from enemy submarines.

Conclusion

Whatever way they are measured, losses in UK Coastal waters were considerable. The collier company Everard's lost sixteen vessels on the East coast during the war, and France Fenwick, a Tyneside based company, lost nine ships in UK coastal waters.¹⁰³ Nick Hewitt has estimated that 1,431 merchant ships were lost in coastal waters during the Second World War, totalling 3,768,599 tons'.¹⁰⁴ Human casualties amounted to something like 3,600 dead amongst the merchant seamen of perhaps

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twenty nations.¹⁰⁵ As J.P. Foynes has put it: 'Not a Battle of the Atlantic but a severe campaign by any other standards'.¹⁰⁶ Similar sentiments were expressed during the war by the Royal Navy officers tasked with defending the convoys. Towards the end of 1942 C-in-C Nore estimated that between the start of the war and 14 November 63,350 transits of the East Coast passage had been made by merchant ship. A total of 157 merchant ships had been lost as a result of enemy action (0.24% of the total number of sailings). He expressed some satisfaction with the figure: 'these losses cannot, in my opinion, be regarded as excessive, and compare, I believe, favourably with other convoys sailing through dangerous waters'.¹⁰⁷ Despite these successes the Royal Navy remained anything but complacent. In October 1943, at the start of the Winter convoy battles, and influenced by the inadequate number of escorts at his disposal, C-in-C Nore wrote to their Lordships of the Admiralty to demand further resources. He commented 'I consider the extraordinarily small losses which have taken place over recent months must be attributed principally to good fortune and lack of enterprise on the part of the enemy'.¹⁰⁸ He warned 'These two factors cannot be expected to continue indefinitely'. The Coastal Convoys were in many ways the poor relation of the bigger struggle taking place in the Atlantic. In late 1943 C-in-C Rosyth expressed grave concerns about the lack of available escorts: 'while every effort is being made to win the Battle of the Atlantic and considerable success is being attained in bringing convoys safely to West coast ports, I view with alarm their passage up and down the East coast unprotected save by a single destroyer'.¹⁰⁹

In strategic terms the successful defence of the coastal convoy routes was just as vital as success in the Battle of the Atlantic. At the height of Allied preparations for D-Day in 1944 coastal convoys were carrying roughly 10% by weight of all goods being moved within the United Kingdom.¹¹⁰ That may seem like a comparatively small figure, but in reality without the coastal convoys there would have been considerable impacts on port operation, shipping availability and the ability of the inland transport network to cope with the demands of war. By the end of the war 21 million tons of coal had been delivered by coastal convoy, together with 9 million tons of general cargo.¹¹¹ Despite such achievements, while the convoy struggles in the Atlantic are celebrated, the coastal convoys have been largely forgotten. The merchant seamen who took part in them were, at least in the early stages of the war, a rather different breed to those who ventured further afield. Their conditions of service were generally poorer and their skills rather different. The experiences of merchant seamen on the coastal convoys differed in some significant respects from those on the Atlantic run. The danger of attack on the East and South coasts was near constant, and while the threat from submarines was significantly less than from S-boats, mines and aircraft was considerably enhanced. The damage suffered by a smaller ship from an explosion was likely to be significantly greater than for a larger vessel. While a coaster might sink more rapidly, crew were more likely to be able to launch rafts and boats from vessels with low freeboards. Men in the water stood a good chance of either being able to make shore or a rescue vessel. The provision of motor launches to cover convoys was especially useful in this respect. There would be no epic survival voyages for the men on the coastal convoys. While the men on the Atlantic convoys during the war had good reason to feel undervalued by the nation whose vital supplies they brought-in, the men on the coasters perhaps had even greater grounds to feel that they were unloved and uncelebrated. They also had good reason to feel comparatively defenceless against the enemy. In the close waters of the English Channel close convoy escort could not operate effectively

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against S-Boats and they could do little to stop mines and aircraft. For their security the coastal convoys relied by late 1941 on a complex defence in depth which started with offensive patrols, involved a standing patrol line together with close escort (which was rarely that close given the need for convoys to proceed in extended lines through the shallows and shoals). The merchant seamen on the coasters could take little comfort in this defence in depth which was rarely visible to them. From the surviving evidence there is a strong sense that coaster crews felt exposed – almost undefended at times. One can occasionally glimpse the effects of the psychological strain of running regular convoys in dangerous waters where the only visible protection might appear to be that offered by on-board DEMS gunners, perhaps an old destroyer or converted fishing vessel manned by the Royal Naval Patrol Service, and a couple of motor launches. While the Battle of the Atlantic turned decisively against the *Kriegsmarine* in early 1943, the coastal waters around the UK and in the North Sea were still being contested by S-Boats and U-Boats in the closing days of the war. The coastal convoy battles are a powerful reminder that while the U-boat came to dominate the war at sea it was always the intention that Britain's commerce would be degraded by submarines, surface ships and aircraft operating together. The experience of merchant seamen on the coastal convoys offers us the occasional glimpse of what life might have been like in the Atlantic if German naval preparations for war had not been interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939.

¹ 'Recognition of veterans of Arctic Convoys and Bomber Command', 19 December 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/recognition-for-veterans-of-arctic-convoys-and-bomber-command> accessed 18 February 2014.

² Richard Woodman, *The Real Cruel Sea: The Merchant Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic 1939-1945* (London: John Murray, 2004), p.57.

³ Contemporary publications on the merchant navy mentioned the coastal convoys in only a handful of pages if they mentioned them at all. See for example Warren Armstrong, *Battle of the Oceans* (London: Jarrolds, 1943), pp.103-107 and Sir Archibald Hurd [ed.], *Britain's Merchant Navy* (London: Odhams, 1944), pp.52-53.

⁴ See 'Convoy attacked in the Channel', 18 July 1940, film id 1051.07, British Pathé Archive.

⁵ See 'Pathé Gazette Special: Shells across the Channel', 26 August 1940, film id 1053.55, British Pathé Archive.

⁶ *The Royal Marines: The Admiralty Account of their Achievement 1939-1943* (London: HMSO, 1944). pp.58-59.

⁷ *British Coaster 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1947).

⁸ A.J.Yeatman, Telegraphist, HMS *Pearl*, 1943-45, BBC People's War Website, A4189098, 13 June 2005, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/98/a4189098.shtml>.

⁹ Alexander McKee, *The Coal Scuttle Brigade* (London: New English Library, 1973).

¹⁰ McKee, *Coal Scuttle*, p.7.

¹¹ Peter C. Smith, *Hold the Narrow Sea: Naval Warfare in the English Channel 1939-1945* (Annapolis [MD]: Naval Institute Press, 1984).

¹² J.P. Foynes, *Battle of the East Coast* (Isleworth: Self Published, 1994).

¹³ Robert Jackson, *Churchill's Moat: The Channel War 1939-1945* (London: Airline, 1995).

¹⁴ Alan Burn, *The Fighting Commodores: The Convoy Commanders in the Second World War* (Annapolis [MD]: United States Naval Institute Press 1999). pp.47-74.

¹⁵ Nick Hewitt, *Coastal Convoys 1939-1945: The Indestructible Highway* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2008).

¹⁶ See for example, Bryan Cooper, *The E-boat Threat* (Oxford: Purnell, 1976); Lieutenant-Commander Peter Scott, *The Battle of the Narrow Seas: A History of the Light Coastal Forces in the Channel and North Sea, 1939-1945* (London: Country Life Ltd, 1945); Gordon Williamson, *E-Boat vs MTB: The*

English Channel 1941-45 (Oxford: Osprey, 2011); Gordon Williamson, *Kriegsmarine Coastal Forces* (Oxford: Osprey, 2009); Gordon Williamson, *German E-boats 1939-45*, (Oxford: Osprey, 2002); Harold Pickles, *Untold Stories of Small Boats at War: Coastal Forces Veterans Remember* (Edinburgh: The Pentland Press, 1994); Leonard C. Reynolds, *Home Waters MTBs & MGBs at War 1939-1945* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000); Jean-Philippe Dallies-Labourdette, *Deutsche Schnellboote 1939-1945* (Stuttgart: Motorbuch Verlag, 2006); Hans Frank, *Die Deutschen Schnellboote im Einsatz* (Berlin: Verlag E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 2006).

¹⁷ See for example Simon Ville, "Defending Productivity Growth in the English Coal Trade During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, vol.XL, No.4 (1987), pp.597-602; Elaine Murphy, "Pirates in Our Channel': The Cromwellian Navy in Ireland, 1649-53", *History Ireland*, vol.19, No.4 (July/August 2011), pp.20-23.

¹⁸ Board of Trade, *Statistical Abstract of the United Kingdom*, No. 82, (London: HMSO, 1938), Table 272, pp.366-367.

¹⁹ S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, vol. 1, (Uckfield: Naval and Military Press, 2004), p.323.

²⁰ John Marriot, 'Smokestack: the Industrial Heritage of the Thames Gateway' in Philip Cohen and Michael Rustin [eds.], *London's Turning: The Making of the Thames Gateway*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) pp.22-23.

²¹ W.K. Hancock and M.M. Gowing, *British War Economy*, (London: HMSO, 1949). p.252.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hancock and Gowing, *British War Economy*, p.258.

²⁴ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 1, p.329.

²⁵ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 1, p.330.

²⁶ *War Diary of the German Naval Staff (Operations Division)*, Part A, Vol.11, 25 July 1940, (Washington DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1948), p.208.

²⁷ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 1, pp.323-324.

²⁸ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 1, p.325.

²⁹ *War Diary of the German Naval Staff (Operations Division)*, Part A, Vol.11, 31 July 1940, (Washington DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1948), p.250.

³⁰ Sönke Neitzel, 'Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe Co-operation in the War against Britain, 1939-1945', *War In History* 2003 10: 448-463.

³¹ Sönke Neitzel, 'Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe Co-operation' [453].

³² Historical Section Admiralty, *The Defeat of the Enemy Attack on Shipping 1939-1945*, vol.1B (London: Admiralty, 1957), table 26.

³³ Neitzel, 'Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe Co-operation' [456].

³⁴ Summary of Air Attacks on East Coast and Channel Convoys October-November 1940, 3 December 1940, TNA: ADM199/74.

³⁵ See 'Britain's answer to the E-Boats – Exclusive Pictures', 16 March 1942, film id 1320.26, British Pathé Archive.

³⁶ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 2, p.254.

³⁷ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 2, p.163.

³⁸ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 2, p.255.

³⁹ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 3, pt.2, p.284.

⁴⁰ Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. 3, pt.2, p.479.

⁴¹ Commodore's Report, FS41, 9 May 1944, TNA: ADM199/303. See also Commodore's Report, FS32, 8 August 1944, TNA: ADM199/304.

⁴² See for example, Coast Lines Ltd to the Ministry of War Transport, 25 January 1945, on suggestion that an echo sounder might be fitted to SS *Newminster*. TNA: ADM199/305.

⁴³ Clarence Winchester, *Shipping Wonders of the World*, vol.2 (London: Fleetway House, not dated), p.1328.

⁴⁴ SS *Alexander Kennedy* was sunk by U-1004 southeast of Falmouth on 22 February 1945. SS *Leonard Pearce* was sunk on 11 January 1940 in the Bristol Channel after a collision with MV *Queen Adelaide*. SS *Sir Joseph Swan* was sunk by an S-boat on 4 September 1940 by an S-boat off Hemsby. SS *New Lambton* was sunk by an S-boat in the same action as *Sir Joseph Swan* (see above). SS *Ambrose Fleming* was sunk by an S-boat off Cromer on 28 April 1941.

⁴⁵ For the size of the Cory fleet see Foynes, *Battle of the East Coast*, p.238. SS *Corburn* was sunk by a mine off Le Havre on 21 May 1940. SS *Corhaven* was sunk near Dover by dive bomber attack on 26 July 1940; SS *Corbrook* was sunk by an S-Boat off Cromer on 9 September 1940; SS *Corheath* was

sunk by a mine off the coast of Kent on 24 January 1941; SS *Corduff* was sunk by an S-Boat off Mundesley on 7 March 1941; SS *Cordene* was bombed and sunk off Mundesley on 9 August 1941. SS *Corfield* was sunk by a mine off Saltfleet on 8 September 1941; SS *Corhampton* was bombed on 15 November 1941 and later sank the following day off Spurn. SS *Cormarsh* was sunk by a mine off Blakeney Point on 29 November 1941. SS *Cormead* was sunk by a mine off Hopton-on-Sea on 25 December 1941. SS *Corfen* was sunk off Frinton-on-Sea by a mine on 3 January 1942. SS *Corland* was sunk off the spurn by a bomb on 5 February 1942. SS *Cormount* was damaged by a mine off Aldeburgh on 13 November and sank under tow.

⁴⁶ <http://www.merchantnavyunshungheroes.co.uk/jack-prior.html> accessed 11 November 2013.

⁴⁷ Fred Dent, DEMS gunner (SS *Methilhill*), Imperial War Museum Interview 22116, 14 January 2002, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80021361> accessed 19 February 2014.

⁴⁸ Report of Aerial Attack on SS *Hull Trader*, 15 July 1940, TNA: ADM199/74.

⁴⁹ See 'Barrage Balloons for Convoys', 24 October 1940, film id 1059.16, British Pathé Archive.

⁵⁰ Burn, *Commodores*, p.68.

⁵¹ Commodore's Report, FS20, 12 April 1944, TNA: ADM199/303. At least two vessels in the convoy (one Dutch and one Panamanian) were criticised for not raising balloons when ordered.

⁵² C-in-C Portsmouth to Secretary of the Admiralty, 24 August 1940, TNA: ADM199/74.

⁵³ See for example report on the rear ships of FS6 opening fire on British Supermarine Walrus, 15 September 1942, and report of the masters, SS *Capitol* (16 September 1942) and SS *Lesto* (Undated). In this particular instance the pilot of the aircraft was considered at fault for approaching too close to the convoy. See C. Bittlestone (Admiralty Trade Division) note on proceedings, 5 October 1942. TNA: ADM199/697.

⁵⁴ Captain HMS *Grimsby*, report of proceedings of convoys FS49 and FS50, 7 December 1939, TNA: ADM199/33.

⁵⁵ See for example report on SS *Thyra II* and SS *William L Halsted* (US) from FS83, from firing at Allied bombers, 2-3 August 1943, TNA: ADM199/566.

⁵⁶ <http://www.merchantnavyunshungheroes.co.uk/jack-prior.html> accessed 11 November 2013.

⁵⁷ See Lt Commander Gurney Braithwaite (Conservative, Holderness), *House of Commons Debates [Commons]*, 14 July 1943, vol.391, cols.236-238 [col.237].

⁵⁸ See for example, *Transactions of the Institute of Marine Engineers*, volume 56, 1944. p.94.

⁵⁹ <http://www.merchantnavyunshungheroes.co.uk/jack-prior.html> accessed 11 November 2013.

⁶⁰ Commodore's Report (comment on SS *Leoville*), FS29, 12 January 1944, TNA: ADM199/570.

⁶¹ W.L. Shortland, 'Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships', 2003, <http://www.heroesofhull.co.uk/pages/memories/WW2/Lol%20Shortland's%20War.pdf> accessed 25 February 2014. p.8.

⁶² The syllabus for oral examination for Home Trade Mates consisted of:

- i. The content and application of the Regulations for Preventing Collision at Sea. Distress and pilot signals; penalties for misuse. The use of the rocket apparatus. An intelligent use of "Notices to Mariners" (Candidates will not be required to commit these to memory.)
- ii. Marking of ordinary lead line. The use and upkeep of mechanical sounding machines and logs. Construction and use of engine-room telegraphs. Anchor work; coming alongside; mooring and unmooring. Management of a ship's boat.
- iii. Understanding of bulkhead sluices, bilges, bilge pumps, water ballast tanks, sounding pipes and the ventilation of holds. Fire extinguishing appliances
- iv. An elementary knowledge of cargo work, as given in the syllabus for First Mate.
- v. To read and understand a barometer and a thermometer. To use a sextant for taking vertical and horizontal angles and to find the index error.

Signalling – British Semaphore up to 8 words a minute. Morse flashing up to 6 words a minute. International code of signals. C.H. Brown, Nicholls Seamanship and Nautical Knowledge, 18th Edition (Glasgow: Brown, Son and Ferguson, 1938 and reprinted 1943).p.ix.

⁶³ Patrick Campbell, 'Come Here I Tell You: Sean Tar at Sea', *The Spectator*, 23 July 1959, p.8.

⁶⁴ See *House of Commons Debates [Commons]*, 21 June 1938, vol.337, cols.875-877.

⁶⁵ Captain HMS *Grimsby*, report of proceedings of convoys FS41 and FS42, 28 November 1939, TNA:ADM199/33.

⁶⁶ <http://www.merchantnavyunshungheroes.co.uk/james-goodchild.html> accessed 11 November 2013.

⁶⁷ Burn, *Commodores*, p.56.

⁶⁸ See for example Commodore's Report, FS51, 3 February 1944, TNA: ADM199/570. Hit by a force 9 gale off the East Coast the convoy scattered into two groups. See Captain HMS *Lancaster*, report of proceedings of convoys FS33, 19 January 1944, TNA:ADM199/569. In thick fog HMS *Lancaster* collided with the SS *Heders* (Swedish).

⁶⁹ Commodore's Report, FS28, 25 April 1944, TNA: ADM199/303. The Master of the SS *George Popham*, acting as Commodore ship refused to sail from Methil until he had received the vessel's seaworthiness certificate from the authorities.

⁷⁰ See Lt Commander Gurney Braithwaite (Conservative, Holderness), *House of Commons Debates [Commons]*, 14 July 1943, vol.391, cols.236-238 [col.237].

⁷¹ See for example Commanding Officer HMS *Southdown*, report of proceedings of convoy FS49, 19 March 1942, TNA:ADM199/692. While the convoy was not attacked their presence was detected via VHF transmissions adding to the strain on watch keepers and escort.

⁷² See Lt Commander Gurney Braithwaite (Conservative, Holderness), *House of Commons Debates [Commons]*, 14 July 1943, vol.391, cols.236-238.

⁷³ Fred Dent, DEMS gunner (SS Methilhill), Imperial War Museum Interview 22116, 14 January 2002, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80021361> accessed 19 February 2014.

⁷⁴ C-in-C Nore to Secretary of the Admiralty, 16 October 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

⁷⁵ See complaints from personnel on-board SS *Fulham*, SS *Colonel Crompton*, SS *John Hopkinson*, logged by Security Officer (Portsmouth), 5 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

⁷⁶ Report by Security Officer (Portsmouth) in Conversation with W. Johnston (First Mate, SS *Fulham*), 5 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

⁷⁷ C-in-C Portsmouth to Admiralty, 14 November 1943, in E-boat attack on Convoy CW211 on 3 November 1943: Complaints from Merchant Navy Personnel, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

⁷⁸ R.J Scarlett, *Under Hazardous Circumstances* (Darlington: Naval & Military Press, 1992): 24 June 1940, *Kingfisher*, LWM [and BEM] to Second Engineer W. Pybus; 8 August 1940, *Empire Crusader*, LWM [and MBE] to Chief Engineer J.E. Cowper, LWM to Able Seaman W. Robson; 8 March 1941, *Togston*, LWM to Captain L. Laurenson; 30 July 1944, *Ocean Courier*, LWM [and MBE] to 2nd Officer T. Pearson; 2 November 1944, *Rio Bravo*, LWM [and MBE] to Captain M.W. Thomas, LWM [and BEM] to Able Seaman J O'Regan.

⁷⁹ Emmanuel Adrien, Free French Merchant Seaman (SS *Daphne*) 1940-41, Imperial War Museum Audio Interview 20135, 2000.

⁸⁰ Additional comments by Commodore R.C. Davenport, as an enclosure to Commodore's Report, FS3, 12 September 1939, TNA: ADM199/33.

⁸¹ Commodore's Report, FS2, 9 September 1939, TNA: ADM199/33.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Historical Section Admiralty, *The Defeat*, p.228.

⁸⁴ Captain W. Champion, Naval Control Senior Officer(Thames and Medway), to Admiralty Trade Division, September 1942, TNA: ADM199/697.

⁸⁵ Commodore's Report, FS5, 13 September 1942. Their Lordships of the Admiralty to Flag Officer in Charge (Tyne), 15 October 1942, TNA: ADM199/697.

⁸⁶ Commodore's Report, FS10, 19 October 1944, TNA: ADM199/305.

⁸⁷ Historical Section Admiralty, *The Defeat*, p.151.

⁸⁸ Historical Section Admiralty, *The Defeat*, p.152.

⁸⁹ For example the report for the large convoy FS50, 27 March 1942, showed the following ships joining: Methil 13; No.22 Buoy 2; Blyth 10; Tyne 10; Sunderland 10; Tees 4; Humber 5. – 5 departures along route. Arrived Southend 49 ships. TNA: ADM 199/692. The report for the small convoy FS2, 13 October 1944 showed the following ships joining: Methil 1; Blyth 2; Tyne 3; Sunderland 2; Seaham 2; Tees 1; Humber 1. Arrived Southend 12 ships. TNA: ADM 199/305.

⁹⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. II, Their Finest Hour* (London: Reprint Society, 1951), p.473.

⁹¹ Historical Section Admiralty, *The Defeat*, pp.29-30.

⁹² Burn, *Commodores*, pp.57-58.

⁹³ See for example, Master of SS *The Baron* to Naval Control Services Southend, 14 September 1942, following collision with SS *Hedera* on FS5. Collision report SS *Highwood* and SS *Gasray* on FS6, 15 September 1942. Collision report SS *Empire Gareth* and SS *Ingerde* (Norwegian) on FS9, 18

September 1942. Collision report SS *Redcar* and SS *Majorca* on FS12, 22 September 1942, TNA: ADM199/697.

⁹⁴ A.J.Yeatman, Telegraphist, HMS *Pearl*, 1943-45, BBC People's War Website, A4189098, 13 June 2005, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/98/a4189098.shtml>.

⁹⁵ Thomas Sanderson, SS *Fulham VII*, BBC People's War Website, A2877401, 29 July 2004, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/01/a2877401.shtml>

⁹⁶ *The Royal Marines*, p.16.

⁹⁷ Minute on file 'East Coast Convoys: Protection against E-boat Attack', 1 November 1943, Minute on file 'Destroyer Reinforcements for Plymouth and other Home Commands, 6 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

⁹⁸ Director Trade Division, 28 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

⁹⁹ Admiralty to C-in-C, Nore, Rosyth and Portsmouth, 25 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

¹⁰⁰ C-in-C Nore to Admiralty, 227 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

¹⁰¹ W. Stephens (Trade Division), 15 November 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

¹⁰² Destroyers: HMS *Worcester*, HMS *Mackay*, HMS *Eglinton*, HMS *Campbell*. MTB's: 438, 440, 443, 444, 445, 689, 693. ML's 112, 114, 250, 517. MGB's: 85, 86, 313, 327, 603, 607, 609, 610. See Admiral Sir John Tovey to the Admiralty, 18 November 1943, 'Destroyer and Coastal Force Action with E-Boats on Night of 24/25th October 1943', published in *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 15 October 1948. pp.5500-5505.

¹⁰³ Foynes, *Battle of the East Coast*, p.238.

¹⁰⁴ Hewitt, *Coastal Convoys*, p.223.

¹⁰⁵ Foynes, *Battle of the East Coast*, p.238.

¹⁰⁶ Foynes, *Battle of the East Coast*, p.238.

¹⁰⁷ C-in-C Nore to Admiralty, 30 December 1942, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

¹⁰⁸ C-in-C Nore to Admiralty, 16 October 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

¹⁰⁹ C-in-C Rosyth to Admiralty, 16 June 1943, TNA: ADM 1/15815.

¹¹⁰ Rail 20-25 million tons of good per month, inland waterways 1 million tons, road 4.5 million tons, coasters (ie excluding ocean-going vessels incorporated in coastal convoys) 2.5 million tons. Figures Hancock and Gowing, *British War Economy*, p.268.

¹¹¹ Central Office of Information, *British Coaster 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1947).